

Eavesdropping Postcards

No people have prized their privacy more than the British, who tuck their houses back of hedges and hide themselves in clubs behind the *London Times*. Any threat to this tradition of privacy is a matter for public alarm. The widespread sale of electronic eavesdropping devices has recently stirred up a hornet's nest and questions are being asked in Parliament.

A London manufacturer has confessed to selling hundreds of listening gadgets made in the form of matchboxes, pens, jewelry, cosmetic compacts, flashlights and other disguises. A somewhat larger device is also available for motor cars. Even the staid *Financial Times* has been advertising Micro-Bug Spy equipment available in a London television shop.

Although the sale of these devices is legal in Britain, their operation requires a license from the Post Office; operation without a license makes the user liable to a fine of £100 and three months in jail. Yet despite this hazard, hundreds of eavesdroppers are quietly listening in on their neighbors. No wonder the British are worried. There's no telling where it will all end. For example, the London Hilton Hotel looks down upon Buckingham Palace Garden. It may be possible for a roomer there to listen to intimate conversations in the palace itself. Nobody, not even the Queen, can be sure of privacy, although Her Majesty's government probably treats her with more respect than Army Intelligence showed Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt when they bugged her room in Chicago.

It is understandable that members of the House of Commons are threshing about in a lather of rage without knowing quite what to do about this troublesome invention. Every man may now be suspect. That harmless old duffer with the over-size Rotary button in his lapel may be recording heaven knows what secret conversations. Not Big Brother but Little Brother and all his sisters are now listening. More than ever silence is golden, and we can understand the British tendency to restrain their conversation to such harmless and equivocal responses as "Quite" and "I see."